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"At-One-Ment"

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My career in crime began early, around 10, as I remember. I belonged to a Cub Scout troop at the "Y". After our meeting, when the candy store clerk was pre-occupied with other customers, I would, each week, pocket a 3 Musketeer to enjoy later.

Nothing tasted sweeter than those purloined prizes. I never got caught, so my spree went on until I moved away. My petty thievery continued unabated.

I graduated to the local 5 and 10 stores, from candy to toys...that was my undoing. I had been eying a red water gun with a few spray adjustments for several weeks. A bit bulky, but I managed to get it in my pocket and almost made it out the door...

... until a hand roughly grabbed my shoulder from behind. I was in it deep, caught red-handed.

No slap on the wrist and don't-do-it-again for me.

The owner took me to the back of the store and called my house. My dad had to come and get me... Let's just say he was not pleased, not at all!

Not only did I have to admit my theft and apologize to the store owner, I had to pay for the pilfered pistol by doing chores. The rest of my punishment we won't talk about.

Today, I remember my first sin as if it was yesterday. I came to know that sin begins when we become conscious of it. Getting caught does that to you and it brings guilt along with it. That experience taught me shame, guilt and embarrassment. It did forever end my life of crime.

Who knows where a sense of sin comes from - God, our parents, schools, religion?

Perhaps we have an inborn moral sense as many philosophers and theologians believe.

We feel shame when our misdeeds are exposed to the community...we come to look bad in the eyes of those who matter to us.

Guilt, however, is internal. It is the inner "I" trained on one's self. Guilt is a chosen emotion.

I felt shame in front of my dad but was not yet self-conscious enough to feel guilt. That came later...soon after my punishment.

A human being, once conscious of guilt and sin, can, I believe, actively make a decision to "go straight".

Shame, internalized as guilt, has a healthy governing effect on our behavior. It socializes us to understand the norms of our society.

It is not surprising that, some of us, particularly those of a Christian background, have such a problem with the notion of sin and hell... It has been held over your heads like the sword of Damocles since infancy.

Unfortunately "good sin" has been co-opted by fundamentalists of all stripes, from being a useful form of social conditioning. Their focus on oppressive judgment rather than mercy takes rehabilitation out of the equation. Fundamentalists, unfortunately, focus on separating the saved from the damned.

I guess there is no hope for me, but at least I will be with my friends in Hell.

Mind you, UUs are not beyond sin, but we see it as serving a different purpose beyond making us feel bad.

Sin is manifest in life. It forces us to look at the evil in our society: racism, classism, oppression, and to do something about it. It also makes us look within to accept our shadow side, to acknowledge our capacity for good and evil.

UUMAN does only half its job, if it just helps us to get - in Emerson's words - "a dollop of moral uplift", without the balance of social consciousness and constructive shame that keeps us within acceptable communal ethical and moral boundaries.

We must come to know ourselves if we are to be of use to the world.

Philip Simmons writes, "If we don't confront our own moral wrongdoing or we think we are the solution to all evil in the world then we locate evil someplace 'out there and beyond our own flawed human heart'".

The notion of sin unsettles us. Emerson wrote, "People wish to be settled, but only so far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them."

I am talking about this because I know in my secret heart that all of us are sinners, large and small... I have hurt people intentionally and unintentionally, by omission and commission. I grieve my mistakes, from stealing candy bars and water guns to being estranged from my youngest son for hurts I caused.

We all pay a price for our missteps, misdeeds and from being out of right relationship with ourselves, each other and God of whatever understanding.

Yom Kippur opens the doorway back to right relationship. It is not about believing in sin but in the drive to regain closeness and connection.

We start by acknowledging our sins against others, and in a UU way we come to recognize our interdependence with others and all existence. To look at our lives this way is "serious stuff". The journey to reconciliation is not to be entered into lightly. Healing is sacred work of the heart and spirit. Confronting our sins with integrity can serve to heal ourselves and our breaches with others.

The interesting thing about acknowledging our sins is that sin both takes us away from the holy, and its acknowledgement and repentance brings us back through forgiveness to re-connection.

The notion of sin then is useful; in short, it is the pathway to wisdom; to knowing ourselves and feeling our estrangement enough... to want to return to health relationships and to forgo revenge.

Aristotle in his Poetics describes sin as error, frailty or a tragic flaw. Understood in that way, sin becomes part of our humanness. If sin is a normal part of our humanity we can then embrace the shadow side of us and come to know what is required, if we are to move back into a holy life.

For both the Buddha and Jesus, knowledge and the experience of suffering is the path to enlightenment and our reunion with the divine.

There is no short cut we can take. We must go through our pain, our isolation, our estrangement if we are to finally reach at-one-ment, and finally be at peace.

Yom Kippur is not so much about dwelling on our badness, but rather on

the reality that we often miss the mark; we hurt others and ourselves. The moving and spiritual part of Yom Kippur is that it prepares us for renewal. When we acknowledge our poor aim, we have a chance to begin again in love.

Our shared worship is about finding new and better ways to love those near us and to love God or what you hold sacred.

When we acknowledge our separation, our loneliness, our disconnect from God and each other, we can heal ourselves and be reunited with our better natures; not, as Simmons writes, "by rejection our sins, our poor aim, but by drawing them into a circle of holiness made large enough to include them."

That is the real meaning of sin. It is not about judgment but about cracking open our closed, hardened hearts through forgiveness, back to reunion with the mystery that unites us all: love.

For Jews and all of us, there are 2nd, 3rd and 4th chances at renewal. At-one-ment, forgiveness which comes as a miracle, is yours for the asking and offering. That is the experience of Grace.

In closing, know this,

    "There is a balm in Gilead  
    To make the wounded whole;  
    There is a balm in Gilead  
    To heal the sin-sick soul."